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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN ELECTIONS FORECAST: MORE OF THE SAME

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[1](#)B. HILLAH 75 "SOUTHERN PROVINCIAL OFFICIALS TAKE AIM AT PM MALIKI AND HIS
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[1](#)M. BAGHDAD 1416 "(SOUTHERN) POLITICS AS USUAL: IRAN'S PLAN FOR IRAQI ELECTIONS
[1](#)N. 07/20/06 OFFICE OF RESEARCH: "MANY IRAQIS CONFIDENT IN AL-MALIKI AND NEW GOVERNMENT"

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Provincial elections are unlikely to result in a radical shift of the southern political map. Despite concerns about voter fraud and low voter registration numbers the overwhelming majority of southern Shi'a say they intend to vote in the elections. Iraq's Shi'a remain deeply divided politically and none of the major Shi'a parties have managed to broaden their base of support beyond a core constituency. Unlike the 2005 elections, there is widespread disenchantment with the establishment religious parties and no unified Shi'a Islamist slate endorsed by the Marja'iyya. According to polling, declining popular support for Muqtada al-Sadr and a season of successful GOI military operations has not translated into increased support for PM Maliki and Da'wa or their ISCI allies. Although former PM Ibrahim Ja'afari, leader of the National Reform Trend, enjoys the highest polling numbers among the Shi'a his National Reform Trend still polls in the single digits. Independents stand to gain relative to their current standing, but the institutional and organizational advantages enjoyed by the incumbents will likely produce election results similar to those of 2005: a collection of provincial councils without clear majorities but ultimately dominated by the established parties. A continuation of an ineffective and unpopular political status quo could widen the rift between southerners and their elected government. End Summary.

A fractured UIA and a silent marja...

¶2. (C) In the December 2005 elections, a unified Shi'a slate ran with the explicit endorsement of the Marja'iyya. For example, a banner hung in Muthanna outside the local office of Sistani's office read, "Those who do not vote for the 555 Alliance are terrorists, Ba'athists, takfiris, or al-Qaeda. Be an Iraqi and a Muslim and vote 555" (ref K). Now the members of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) are intensely campaigning against one another and the Shi'a clerical class has thus far refused to endorse any party. On August 27, Grand Ayatollah Sistani endorsed the process itself, calling participating in the process an "important duty," but did not give his support to any candidates (ref A). The most critical statements to date have come from Grand Ayatollah Ishaq al-Fayyadh, who on August 4 lamented the "disappointing" performance of elected parties, instructing Iraqis to "elect reputable and competent candidates" and warning voters about "unrealistic promises, rhetorical slogans, and empty propaganda" (ref F).

¶3. (C) The reluctance of the marja'iyya to endorse parties is matched only by the eagerness of the parties to hijack the clergy for political benefit. The legality of using religious symbols and figures during election campaigns became a key issue in the summer debate over the elections law. In its July 24 veto of the draft law, the Presidency Council endorsed the right of candidates "to display the strength

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of their connections and influence by mobilizing personages...in their election campaign." Parties that convince voters that they enjoy the special blessing of top religious figures will likely garner extra votes.

...combined with an aggressive Maliki...

¶4. (C) Over the last year an increasingly confident and assertive central government, led by Prime Minister Maliki, has undertaken a series of aggressive military options throughout Iraq. The first operation, 'Charge of Horseman,' began on March 25 in Basrah. Hailed by supporters as necessary action against "those outside the law," Sadrists decried the Basrah offensive as a "genocide" (Sadr MP Saleh al-Egaily) and accused Maliki of ushering in a "new dictatorship" (MP Falah Shenshel). Governor Waeli complained that PM Maliki ignored him after arriving in Basrah, while Deputy PC Chair Nasif Obeidi criticized Maliki and the IA for failing to coordinate with local officials, a lack of "strategic vision," and "inflaming the Sadr trend." Criticism mounted as the week wore on without significant IA progress, and politicians began plotting to oust PM Maliki with a no-confidence vote in parliament. However, government forces eventually prevailed with U.S. assistance, paving the way for operations in Sadr City and elsewhere.

¶5. (S/NF) Military and rhetorical resistance to the military operation "Tidings of Peace," begun in Maysan on June 19, was almost non-existent in comparison. The first shots fired against the ISF occurred two weeks into the operation, and Zaid al-Hoshi, a local official who reportedly enjoys close ties to JAM, admitted that "people are starting to feel better and enjoying their freedom...even former members of JAM are starting to talk about a new reality, with a new perception of the government and the ISF" in an August 21 meeting with poloff.

¶6. (C) Many of the senior JAM leadership fled to Najaf, Iran, and elsewhere, while most of the rank-and-file

militia members simply disappeared into civilian society. While the long-term impact of the operations remains unknown, in the interim Maliki and his allies have been able to boast that the GOI has established control, however tenuous, over southern Iraq.

...is Sadr's loss...

17. (C) The initial success of the government offensives, combined with public reaction against JAM excesses, has cost Muqtada al-Sadr some of his popular base. Maysan governor Adil Mhoder al-Maliki admitted that "the people want to see new blood. As a Sadrism, I can say that the people are beginning to reject Sadrists." Muqtada himself has acknowledged the public backlash, and in response extended the JAM "freeze" indefinitely and announced the transformation of Jaysh al-Mahdi into a cultural and social organization (ref H). Although the Sadr Trend is not running a specific list in the elections, various Sadrism fronts have been registered, including 'Abilities of Maysan' (Maysan), 'The Movement of the Cultured and Elite' (Basrah), and 'Sadr al-Iraq' (Najaf).

18. (C) Polling indicates decreased Shi'a support for Sadr and his movement. In a June-July State Department (INR/R) poll, 69 percent of Shi'a respondents (up from 56 percent in January) expressed "not very much or no confidence" in the Office of the Martyr Sadr (ref I). Likewise, in confidential polling conducted by NDI, the percentage of Shi'a expressing positive feelings about Sadr declined from 40 to 35 percent between May and July. At the same time, 18 percent of Shi'a say they would vote for the Office of the Martyr Sadr in the next election. This is roughly equal to ISCI's 20 percent and Dawa's 22 percent among Shi'a, but far ahead of Fadilah (6 percent).

...but not a gain for Da'wa or ISCI...

19. (C) Sadr's declining popularity and the increasing assertiveness of the GOI have not translated into increased support for the remaining members of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Roughly half of Shi'a expressed confidence in Da'wa and PM Maliki (by contrast, three-quarters of southern Iraqis expressed confidence in Maliki after he formed his new government in June 2006). Shi'a confidence in Dawa has declined from 61 percent in January to 51 percent in July. Shi'a confidence in ISCI is also down, from 56 percent in January to 45 percent in July.

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10. (C) As incumbent parties (both nationally and in many provinces), ISCI and Da'wa probably bear the brunt of public dissatisfaction with flagging service delivery, widespread corruption, and linkages of the parties to militias, Iran, and extremist ideologies. Iraqis constantly complain about the failure of provincial and central government to provide water, sewage, employment, and electricity. In a June NDI poll, for example, 36 percent of south-central respondents and 34 percent of southern respondents identified basic services as the "most important problem" (security received 9 percent and 6 percent, respectively). Government corruption is another frequent complaint from contacts. As Basrah Sunni leader Abdel al-Kharaji said, "Right now 100 percent of PC funds go into (PC members') pockets, so if we elect people that take only 50 percent, even that would be an improvement." Finally, the parties suffer from their perceived ties to Iran, militias, and strict interpretations of Islam.

...Ja'afari waits in the wings...

¶11. (C) Ja'afari could benefit from dissatisfaction with the government and the National Reform Trend is believed to enjoy the support of many Sadrists. "It received a lot of attention," ISCI MP Taki said on August 26, adding that he expected many Sadrists to support the trend. Wasit PC member and Sadrist Ahmed Ebrah said Ja'afari's party had a "good future" and "a good mix of secular and religious representatives." In two separate, recent polls, 62 percent of Arab Shi'a expressed a positive view of Ja'afari. However, the former prime minister does have his detractors. Dhi Qar sheikh Ali Munshid called Ja'afari a "moron" during a July 30 meeting with the PRT, while Fadilah leader Dr. Bassam Sharif told poloff that "We already had him once, we don't need a repeat" on July 17. At present Ja'afari's personal popularity has not transferred to his new party. In an August NDI poll, only 5 percent of southern Shi'a identified the National Reform Trend as their first choice of parties.

...and everyone's a nationalist.

¶12. (C) All parties and candidates strike similar themes, portraying themselves as nationalists and emphasizing their Iraqi identity and commitment to stability and development. Two issues on which politicians can distinguish themselves are federalism and the SFA negotiations. In a recent poll a majority of Iraqis in the south agreed that "a system in which the central government has most of the power is best for Iraq for now" (ref E). ISCI continues to support a nine-province region in the south but has backed away from its strong public rhetoric, perhaps in recognition of this lack of public support. Fadilah claims to support a strong central government even as Basrah Governor Waeli campaigns to make Basrah a one-province region. Da'wa and the Sadrists both back a centralized government. Despite private assurances of support, both ISCI and Da'wa figures have criticized the SFA publicly to inoculate themselves against criticism from Fadilah and the Sadrists.

...And southern independents remain unorganized...

¶13. (C) 112 parties and 117 individuals in southern provinces registered for the provincial elections, only 30 of which competed in the 2005 elections. Over half of the parties contain some variant of the word 'independent' in their name, and only 3 refer to themselves as 'parties' (Note: Colloquially, the Arabic "party" (hizb/ahzab) is synonymous with the establishment religious parties. End note.) Self-styled independent and secular candidates portray themselves as poised to ride a wave of public reaction against the corruption, violence, and ineffective governance associated with religiously-based parties. At the same time, independents have repeatedly asked for U.S. assistance to balance a playing field allegedly distorted by Iranian influence and the institutional and organizational advantages enjoyed by the incumbent parties. Tribal sheikh and independent politician Khasan, for example, likened the elections to "a war in which one side has planes and tanks and the other only has pistols." There is no polling data available on independent candidates.

...Maliki is courting the tribes...

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¶14. (C) The established parties are campaigning for the tribal vote. The controversy over PM Maliki's Tribal Support Councils (TSCs) is driven by recognition of the importance of the tribal vote. Many observers (including allies of the PM) have characterized the councils as a means to mobilize political support for Da'wa (ref C). On

August 31, provincial officials, including governors and PC chairs and deputy chairs, attended a conference calling for provinces to oppose the TSCs and establish their own tribal councils. Babil Da'wa officials alleged that Amar al-Hakim led this effort, and an ISCI-backed tribal council was reportedly established in Hillah on September 4 (ref B).

¶15. (C) Although numerous 'independent' tribal leaders and parties registered for the elections, until now the majority of sheikhs seem unwilling or unable to actively campaign without U.S. support. For example, U.S. officials have repeatedly met with Ali Munshid from Dhi Qar and Hakim Khasan from Muthanna, two prominent sheikhs who founded political parties and formed an alliance. A planned fund-raising rally for the alliance, hosted by Anbar sheikh Abu Risha, was delayed indefinitely over a question of the PM's attendance. The sheikhs recently asked for U.S. funding and assistance brokering meetings with Gulf Arab countries. Ultimately, the majority of the tribal vote will likely go to the party best able to funnel reconstruction projects, jobs, and money through the sheikhs.

...allegations of IHEC/GEO corruption...

¶16. (S/NF) Many contacts allege that the Governorate Electoral Offices (GEOs) and Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) will be compromised by intimidation and corruption. On August 19, unknown gunmen killed two IHEC staff members and wounded a third in Basra. Zainab al-Ribhawi (strictly protect), a former IHEC observer, told poloff earlier this month said that she expected fraud in the election. "The IHEC does not directly belong to parties," she said, "but the staff have an idea about who should win the election." Asked which parties IHEC staff support, she laughed and said "all of the female IHEC staff in southern Iraq wear veils." The former manager of the Wasit IHEC office, Haidar Allawi, accused the Wasit GEO head of being an ISCI partisan and predicted that "ISCI will manipulate the elections process by selecting elections observers" (ref J). In the 2005 elections, polling station directors and employees forged ballots, disqualified ballots from opposition candidates, and 'encouraged' illiterate citizens to vote for the religious slate (ref K).

...but Iraqis still intend to vote...

¶17. (C) Despite doubts about the fairness of the elections, the overwhelming majority of southern Iraqis say they intend to vote in the provincial elections. In a recent poll, 81 percent of Iraqis in southern and south-central Iraq said they were "very or somewhat likely to vote" (ref I). About 40 percent of Iraqis said they expected either "major problems" with the elections or the elections "to not be free and fair at all." By comparison, roughly 3,500,000 Iraqis in southern Iraq, or 68 percent of eligible voters, participated in the 2005 provincial elections.

...and the likely result may resemble 2005.

¶18. (C) Of the 369 provincial council seats awarded in the south, 169 went to the slates of the four major parties - Da'wa, Da'wa Tanzim, Fadhilah, and ISCI. Many more went to coalitions and 'independent' candidates affiliated with a larger party (for example, ISCI/Badr-affiliated Shahid Mihrab slate in Diwaniyah or the Islamic Basrah coalition). Wasit Fadhilah head Jaafar Sayidi referred to this phenomenon on June 23, saying that in 2005, "a number of parties were created just to get people elected and then disappeared after the elections." Although the parties enjoyed majorities in only a few of the provincial councils they ultimately dominated southern politics by virtue of their ties to national government, superior funding, and militias.

Comment

¶19. (C) Provincial elections are unlikely to deliver the political change desired by many Iraqis. With the exceptions of SFA and federalism, it is difficult to identify policy differences between the major Shi'a

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parties. In the absence of clear policy positions, voters are likely to define parties based on the party leadership and its relation to provincial and national spheres of power. This may explain why the popularity of the party leader and the party itself are often identical in polling results, and the tendency to conflate parties and personalities could reduce the impact of an open versus closed list electoral system. With each party enjoying a committed but small base, real electoral gains will depend on securing the votes of Sadrists and other disenfranchised voters. Absent a radical shift in Iraqi politics, the likely result of the elections will be a fragmented southern political map dominated by Da'wa and ISCI. A continuation of an ineffective and unpopular political status quo could widen the rift between southerners and their elected government. End comment.

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